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Wordsworth's Later Style

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Wordsworth's Later Style

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invoke, and who casts the seducer into hell at the end of the play. As I pointed out in my article, it is only in this context that the ending of the play is defensible. Otherwise, we must stand with Camus and Dom Juan himself. We must believe that Molière has insulted his audience by granting a soulless lump of cold stone an arbitrary victory over his human hero. This supernatural ending to a drama of purely physical action would be a nasty, tawdry contradiction of the play's entire momentum. I will spare the reader a recapitulation of my entire argument in support of my interpretation of the conflict, but it seems to me evident that only by admitting God as Dom Juan's principal antagonist can one make tolerable sense of Molière's play.

FRANCIS L. LAWRENCE
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Wordsworth's Later Style

To the Editor:

The three "close readings" described in the March 1978 Editor's Column were introduced with this line from Marianne Moore: "we do not admire what we cannot understand." The proposition is, of course, as patently false to experience as is Keats's at the end of the "Ode on a Grecian Urn." We often admire exceedingly what we do not understand, precisely because we do not understand it. This is as true of literary criticism as of religious revelation (the two activities having become strangely similar these days), and one of the three "close readings" referred to is a significant case in point. I admire Geoffrey Hartman's article "Blessing the Torrent: On Wordsworth's Later Style" (*PMLA*, 93 [1978], 196–204) because, as one of the specialist readers noted, it seems to "open perspectives." I am haunted by the possibility, however, that my admiration is naïve and that what I would believe is sublimity of thought may be, in part at least, ingenious confusion.

It would be unfair not to place the Wordsworth article in context. Hartman is quite consciously voyaging on strange seas of hermeneutic thought. His professed aim is to "de-normalize" what appears to be a reasonably "normal" sonnet by revealing "an unapparent meaning"; or, as he puts it in the Preface to *Beyond Formalism*, "to release a hidden or repressed content." Now a certain latitude must be allowed to an enterprise that takes literary criticism into the realm not only of philosophy but of psychoanalysis as well. We suffer, therefore, the obstructive, opaque, and esoteric jargon—"infinetizing,"

"phantomized," "the topos of the sublime as such, of the *atopic*," "uncovers a *traumatological* structure," "Wordsworth's lucy-feric style . . . appears to be the opposite of luciferic." But our hopes of liberating Hartman's own "hidden" meanings from all this are not always fulfilled. Sometimes it takes an act of blind faith to believe that such verbal pyrotechnics signify something more than sound and fury.

And if we do possess that requisite faith (or credulity), there are both theoretical and practical difficulties to be faced. Whatever else it may involve, interpretation cannot escape the fact that it is also an act of persuasion that necessarily has to do with rules of evidence and argumentation. How well and of what does Hartman persuade us? What evidence does he present and by what rules does he present it? Surely interpretation is not altogether immune from the scientific discipline that condemns the multiplication of needless, arbitrary, or self-indulgent complexities. Hartman's excursions into "unapparent" meaning frequently overleap the bounds of evidence and of common sense.

His discussion of the verb "possess" in Section vi of the article is, I think, a fair and typical example. Although both English usage and poetic context suggest the contrary, Hartman decides that "we cannot be sure that 'possess' is in the indicative." He then piles hypothetical assumptions one upon the other—"It might be read," "if we understand," "may involve"—to arrive at the reading he desires: Wordsworth blesses the torrent. Certainly the rules of English grammar do not stand in his way: "Though this further reading does not harmonize grammatically with the line that follows, it may hover over it as an inward possibility." There may be enlightened readers of Kenneth Burke to whom such a statement is meaningful. Not being among them, I can only conclude that Hartman is simply trying to have his cake and eat it too. Anything, it seems, can mean or echo anything (see the discussion of supposed Miltonic echoes in Section vii), as long as we attach enough "may's," "might's," and "if's."

It is not easy to decide whether these extravagances are personal or methodological. Have Hartman's productive insights into Romantic place-names become a compulsive hobbyhorse? Or does the article suggest the inherent danger of "Continental" modes of criticism? If the critic proposes a journey beyond formalism in order to liberate the repressed content of a poem, he must somehow persuade us that the subjectivity so liberated transcends his own. I doubt that Hartman always succeeds in doing this. His entry into the sonnet is by way of his

own "discomfort" at its initial apostrophe: "How art thou named?" But his attempts to convince us that what he feels is what Wordsworth felt or what we, too, should feel are terribly strained. Attempts to squeeze relevance out of Wordsworth's letter to Beaumont in Section II or to find meaningful ambiguity in the phrase "Rotha, my Spiritual Child" in Section V are shallow bits of ingenuity at best.

But what of the article's putative subject, Wordsworth's later style? Hartman proposes to elucidate the meaning of neoclassical, formulaic rhetoric in the sonnet and, by extension, in Wordsworth's later work. What do we learn about this subject? We learn that Wordsworth may use such rhetoric both to express and to "domesticate" his fears concerning the power of imagination. This is interesting, but Hartman himself glosses over the fact that such rhetorical devices are present in Wordsworth's early poetry as well. The article gives no hint concerning the kinds of quantitative, objective verbal studies on which differentiations between "early" and "late"—not to mention neoclassical and Romantic—styles can reasonably be made.

One could multiply instances of assertive, undocumented, flamboyant impressionism in the article (see, for example, the assertion of "strange resemblance [sic]" between the sonnet's "narrow room" and the "narrow chasm" of the Simplon Pass in Section III). But there are larger issues at stake. Few of us would deny that new-critical formalism has seen its day or that critics like Hartman have opened up exciting new possibilities. For this, admiration is due, even if we happen to feel that some of these critics make assumptions about the nature of language that threaten the very existence of literary studies. At least there is room for debate, and, as Blake says, "Damn braces." The time may have come, however, to reaffirm some basic rules of the game, things like plain speech wherever possible, attention to evidence, and the avoidance of ingenuity for its own sake. More and more the critic himself—*his* consciousness, *his* subjectivity, *his* intentionality—struts center stage wearing the mask of poet and poem. Whatever my admiration for the latter, and it is real, I still think that I prefer the "normalized" William Wordsworth to the "unapparent" Geoffrey Hartman.

SPENCER HALL
Rhode Island College

Mr. Hartman replies:

One can reply to a polemical piece; it is harder to engage something that despite its faint opening

praise does not really try to understand the perspective and critical style it attacks. I won't defend that style here; but I can suggest that Hall's call for law, order, and proper argument has its own questionable assumptions that, to my mind, depress literary studies today.

I note first that no counterinterpretation is offered. A normal interpretation is assumed—perhaps the one I start from in my essay—but that has never been articulated. Even a "normal" interpretation has to be made; it is not a given until it is made. How easy and fruitless it is to insist that poets have their commonsensical, normal meaning, without articulating it! Anyone who does try to express that meaning would learn, however, that poems of stature *achieve* their so-called normalcy against odds, which remain part of the meaning. Interpretation, I. A. Richards once said, is always a victory against odds.

There may not even be a single location of meaning. The interpreter is bound to enter the scene of interpretation, either in his own person or in a representative capacity. All meaning is received meaning. Moreover, the retroactive force of literature on literature—and literature for me includes the literature of criticism and scholarship—is by now too well substantiated to be reduced to subjectivity and personalism.

Hall thinks I am interested in what is "unapparent" for egotistical reasons. By constructing an unapparent meaning I try to become apparent as interpreter. Yet he does not refute the interpretation put forward; instead, by his own appeal to the reader he claims (1) that I have not followed certain rules of the game, so my findings cannot be admitted, and (2) that some of my findings (not clearly specified) might be worthwhile but that others (specified) are "shallow bits of ingenuity." Granted that he did not have the space to back his arguments fully, he still should have said something about the rules, and should not have assumed so magisterially that every sane reader shares his understanding of them.

Concerning the "unapparent" level of meaning, I go as carefully as possible from more apparent to less apparent, although these distinctions are relative. What is less apparent today may be apparent enough tomorrow; the obverse movement, from apparent to unapparent, is also familiar to those who appreciate the mutability of language and of meaning. Has Hall never questioned the appearances? "The unsaid part is the best of every discourse" (Emerson).

I return to the issue of rules. What constitutes evidence, or the relation of hypothesis to proof, is, as everyone knows, much disputed. If, for instance,

one does not accept any meaning that is not straightforwardly grammatical, then indeed one must reject my interpretation of "possess" in line 13 of Wordsworth's "To the Torrent at Devil's Bridge." But if grammatical expression is considered as only *one* rule by which to determine meaning in poetry, then the situation changes. My subject was not Wordsworth's grammar or his poetic ingenuity in that area but his remarkable attitude toward the "force" of language. The grammatical point about "possess" is subordinated in my essay to Wordsworth's concern with naming, cursing, and blessing, whose locutionary force may extend (that was my suggestion) to such grammatical particulars.

Hall, I suspect, has a more prudential (he calls it "plain speech") understanding of language than I have. He combs my essay to show that it is iffy in a way that hides assertiveness, that it plays with terms, and that it is unquantitative. Though he considers these as flaws of argumentation, they seem to me presumptive matters of style. He is less of a logician than an *arbiter elegantiarum*. But I don't want to dispute a particular point: it is the entire attitude of the man that is perplexing. What if the game of criticism has changed, or the rules of the game are being questioned? Even if that were not so, do we want critics to be certified by a Normal School?

As to style, it is conceivable that a flexible or playful mode of writing—apparently admitted only *outside* of criticism—comes closer to the rules of the language game than Hall's sober, scientific, and uppity standards. Besides, he knows he is not all that objective. "Damn braces," he says, quoting from Blake's *Proverbs of Hell*. He might have remembered further hellish axioms. For instance: "One Law for the Lion and the Ox is Oppression." Or the other half of what he quotes: "Bless relaxes." Then "Let Hall house of Hall relax, and bless the Torrent with the Interpreter."

He himself violates a rule of the game, as I understand it, by an imperfect quotation from *Beyond Formalism* that makes it appear as if I were a vulgar demystifier or depth analyst. The preface to my book discusses a difference in the concept of literary form. I do not simply justify the Continental style of criticism but point out, rather, that "it often neglects literary form and dissolves art into a reflex of consciousness, technology, or social process." I go on to suggest, however, that "In Anglo-America, respect for literary form is *a priori*, but not necessarily deeper. A more radical difference between the two approaches [Continental and Anglo-American] centers on the presumed objectivity of the work of art: for us the reader in his selfhood is the problem, and

he needs historical, philological, or similar correctives . . . but for the Continental critic it is the objective form of art that seems problematic, and he seeks to liberate it, to release a hidden or repressed content." Hall leaves out the concluding sentence, with which I will conclude again, in the hope, now as then, of finding a better understanding in this country for an alternative, though by no means alien, mode of thinking about art. "Not our subjectivity is to be feared but our overreaction to it, those pseudo-objective criteria which imprison both the work and ourselves."

GEOFFREY HARTMAN
Yale University

La Vie de Saint Alexis

To the Editor:

To Evelyn Birge Vitz's excellent demonstration of the inadequacy of Greimasian narratological analysis, in "*La Vie de Saint Alexis: Narrative Analysis and the Quest for the Sacred Subject*" (*PMLA*, 93 [1978], 396–408), I should like to add some considerations on the origin of Greimas' doctrines and to suggest a broader-based, more generally valid approach.

Like many other types of linguistic, stylistic, and philosophical theory, Greimas' concepts of Subject, Object, Beneficiary, and the rest are too narrowly based on Indo-European grammatical structure. The major clause or "sentence" in modern French, English, and other Indo-European languages has one element traditionally termed the "subject," one the "direct object," and one the "indirect object" (all three of them either simple or compound), and various complements indicating helpers, obstacles, and the like. This type of linguistic structure is the obvious source not only of Greimas' analysis but also of medieval philosophers' distinctions between the *signans* (nominative, hence "actor" or subject, "that which signifies") and the *signatum* (accusative, hence "goal" or direct object, "that which is signified") and of Ferdinand de Saussure's corresponding formulation of the linguistic sign as involving a *signifiant* and a *signifié*.

These structural features are far from universal. Even Latin sentence structure did not involve the obligatory presence of a subject (cf. such impersonal verbs as *pluit* 'it rains,' which, in their literal meaning, cannot have a subject). Greimasian analysis in terms of a single Subject and Object is applicable only to tightly knit works such as Racinian tragedies (cf. the old parallel between the five acts of *Bérénice* and the five-word Tacitean sentence *Titus Berenicen invitus invitam dimisit*).